

## Oral History Interview

with Francine Zorn Trachtenberg

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Media and Public Affairs Building

by G. David Anderson, University Archivist and Historian

For the George Washington University Oral History Program

ANDERSON: This is an oral history interview with Francine Zorn Trachtenberg, April the 29<sup>th</sup>, 2009 at the home of Francine Zorn Trachtenberg at 1825 23rd Street in Washington, DC. The oral interview is conducted by G. David Anderson, University Archivist and Historian for the George Washington University Oral History Program. This is a first oral history interview with Francine Zorn Trachtenberg, wife of former George Washington University president Stephen Joel Trachtenberg. Also, it is our hope to include this in the online encyclopedia if permission is given to, and the reason I ask that because it, when it's done verbally, it's kind of a pre-contract in that respect. Let us begin by going back to your background, of family, of growing up, of early education, middle education, later education, and then your graduate studies where you eventually met President Trachtenberg.

FTRACHTENBERG: I grew up in Brooklyn in a neighborhood called Flatbush, and I grew up in a house that my mother grew up in. It was a multi-family dwelling owned by my grandparents, and my mother went to kindergarten in the same school I did, and I had the same kindergarten teacher as did my brother that my mother had. So there was a great deal of continuity in terms of the neighborhood and my mother's relationship to it. It was a predominantly first generation neighborhood, mixed neighborhood, in that it was a lot of Jewish families, Italian, Irish, Greek, a lot of first generation, multi generational families. These were two and three family houses and so the grandparents knew each other, the children knew each other, the grandchildren knew each other. The public school was almost entirely a Jewish school because the Catholic children in the neighborhood all went to parochial schools. And so we saw each other on the street because we all played on the street after school. But our school days were very segregated in that. So I went to P.S. 179 in Brooklyn, still standing, still there. Then went to a new junior high school. It was called Ditmas, which is the name of the neighborhood. Junior High School 62, public school. A relatively new, very modern and kind of exciting to be one of the first classes in that school. And then I went to a venerable high school in New York, Erasmus Hall High School, the oldest public high school in Brooklyn, originally a Dutch founded academy for elite students in Brooklyn called Erasmus Hall or Erasmus academy, and in, it was founded originally in 1787. In 1887 it became a New York City public school. That's the time the subway was expanding from Manhattan into Brooklyn. It brought new families, new neighborhoods and Erasmus is a, by design a neo gothic building four blocks square with a beautiful landscaped courtyard and a historic building of the original academy in the middle with a statue of Desiderius Erasmus in

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front, and it was for the students who were there, in my day, it was one of the, if not the largest high schools in New York City. We had seven thousand students. It was a fully integrated school, thirty-five hundred blacks, thirty-five hundred whites. Our classes were not completely integrated. We were packed into academic and commercial programs. And so the classes were very crowded. We were on split shifts. We had intensive academics. One of the few high schools that offered zoology and advanced physics, advanced math courses and things. And it was a wonder and rigorous high school experience.

I left high school and went to Brooklyn College to start. It was economically a fabulous deal. I think it cost fifty-six dollars a semester for tuition. However, I found it intellectually boring, I think is a fair word, partly because my high school had been so advanced that my freshman year required courses I used some of the same textbooks. My teachers were doing masters degrees, my high school teachers were doing masters degrees at Brooklyn College when I was, as an undergraduate, so I saw the same people, I was studying the same things. I didn't give it much of a chance.

I didn't want to stay very long and I transferred to Boston University. One thing that did happen to me, though, at Brooklyn College, was I came into college thinking I would be a math major. A few years before in high school, I had wanted to study architecture and my college advisor, very nicely and very sweetly said to me, given the size of our high school class, I can only process three applications for college from each student. I don't know of a single school that will accept a girl for studying architecture. I don't want you to waste your applications. Why don't you consider math or something else? Well, I knew nobody who was an architect, and I knew nobody who else had college advice, and so I took Mrs. Ginsburg's advice. I went to Brooklyn College and became a math major. I never got to a creative level. I got to a kind of routine level. I did well, but it didn't give me any excitement. One of the required courses that I took my freshman year was art history. And I fell in love with the subject and decided that instead of studying math, I would study art history. So, although I didn't graduate from Brooklyn College, it set me on a career path and when I got to Boston University where I transferred, I declared as my major Art History, and that's what I studied from then on.

ANDERSON: Hm. It's fascinating. How did you, what, give me your take on meeting Stephen Joel Trachtenberg. He was a dean, I know, at Boston University and you were a graduate student.

FTRACHTENBERG: That's right. I was in my last year of studying for a master's degree. I did that degree very part time. And I was a full time employee of the university. I was the secretary of the art history department. A not very well compensated position but it came with the benefit of tuition remission. And when I took the job, I interviewed for the job, I had asked or said that the job was of interest to me only if I knew that I'd be allowed to take courses and that that might mean, not necessarily at night, but in the middle of the day. And the chair had agreed that I could work out a schedule with him and I could take one or two courses a semester. So it took me three years to finish what was really a one year masters program. And I was in the last year of that when Stephen came to B.U. to be Associate Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. My degree was in the graduate school. They were unrelated academic entities. However, the undergraduates in the art history department that I served as secretary did have work with the dean. It's also a very primitive technology time. We had one Xerox machine in

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the entire college. It was in the dean's office. We still mimeographed exams on those old mimeograph machines that you turned with a drum, had a drum and you turned the wheel. And so I spent time in the dean's office doing administrative work. A friend said, "Hey, there's a new young dean. Go check him out."

ANDERSON: Laughs.

FTRACHTENBERG: I did. I got introduced to Stephen in the hallway. I think it's fair to say I fell more quickly for him than he might have for me. I then spent a lot of afternoons, late afternoons, four-thirty, five o'clock doing all the photocopying that the department required, and after several weeks of this, Stephen came out of his office one day and said "You still here?" Why don't we go to dinner?"

ANDERSON: Laughs.

FTRACHTENBERG: And that started it.

ANDERSON: That sounds just like him. Doesn't it?

FTRACHTENBERG: It sounds just like him. And we went to McGrail's Grill, located right near Fenway Park, an easy hop from the Boston University campus, had a steak and baked potato, and the rest is history.

ANDERSON: When did you pick up the certificate of advanced studies at Harvard? Was this, when was this?

FTRACHTENBERG: I graduated, I finished my masters in 1971 in Art History and I did some teaching the following year. I was filling in sabbatical leave for people and I was teaching at both BU and then later at Simmons College. They were not courses I was particularly interested in. They were jobs first year teachers get. You're doing someone else's course if they're on sabbatical and I really wasn't enjoying it very much. And Stephen sensed that I wasn't having a good time, and he suggested that I think about changing careers. I said "I don't have a clue what else I want to do. But it's true. This isn't my favorite occupation at the moment," although I came back to it with a lot more enthusiasm years later. And he suggested that I look at a program that the Harvard Graduate School of Education gave, which was called a "Certificate of Advanced Study." It was for people who already had a master's degree.

And I applied and got in and did one in educational administration and social policy. The, my advisor, who knew my background in art history said "You have to take eight courses. We'd like four of them to be at the education school. You can take any other courses at Harvard that are relevant to what you are interested in, except, no art history. Because I think he knew it would be easy to go do that. So I did take four courses out of the Ed school. I took Doris Kearns's course in history of the presidency. And I took a couple of courses at the Kennedy School, one a joint business school-Kennedy School course, one a joint law school-Kennedy School course. And as an elective, I did sit in on a fascinating art historian, Michael Fried, who was teaching contemporary art, but that was not for credit. I did that in between other things.

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And then I got the degree in '73, 1973, and went to work after that on a Carnegie Corporation grant. And that was my first academic administrative job. It was about women in careers.

ANDERSON: Fascinating. When President Trachtenberg accepted the position at the University of Hartford, a number of things happened. One thing that we had discussed before was that, I believe that you said that your father had moved to Hartford as well, and actually continued there for twenty years afterwards, even after you left.

FTRACHTENBERG: Well, my parents moved to Hartford not when we got there, but towards the end of our years there. We came in 1977. We had a two-year old. Adam was two the summer that we moved. Ben was born the next year in Hartford. And my parents came. We left Hartford in '88 to come to George Washington University. My parents I think got to Hartford in '85 or '86. So, my dad was still actively working when we first got to Hartford.

ANDERSON: Also, at Hartford, I, from my own research, I see, the early development of your work with nonprofits, long before WETA, well, not long before, but before WETA and the Jewish Community Center etc. and so on. You started actually in Hartford. Was this the originating place where you really got into this aspect of . . .

FTRACHTENBERG: Yes, in Boston, I was primarily a student and then a faculty member but did not do very much community service. When we got to Hartford, I was teaching relatively early as an adjunct. I taught art history beginning the second semester we were there. But one course a semester. And I had children who were starting preschool and joined several boards in Hartford, not-for-profits. One was the Hartford Jewish Community Center. One was Connecticut Public Broadcasting, which I was on for eight of the eleven years that we were in Hartford. A very different station than WETA here in Washington in that Connecticut is a state-wide station. We were located on the Trinity College campus at the time. And an interesting transition. I was there to be on the search committee for the hiring of the new executive for that station, and really began to learn the public broadcasting business. And at the Jewish Community Center I was initially primarily involved in early childhood education and what that agency did for children.

But my work changed. My paid employment changed. And I went from teaching art history to being the director of construction projects at the university. And I took that talent of being what's called in the trade an "owner's representative" to chose some of my community service work. When the Jewish Community Center decided to expand, I donated countless hours of preparing the agency for that writing, what's called an "architectural program" of what their needs were, giving needs assessment, worked with the architect in designing the building and getting them ready for construction. And spent a lot of time doing that. So my job at the university was half-time at that point, and I think my job in the community was time-and-a half.

ANDERSON: There are so many paths that I found, doing research on your background. Of course, there's the work with non-profits, with education in that aspect, your academic career, the aspect of collecting as part of your American photography background. Which is something that I assume actually began even in graduate school and has continued to today.

FTRACHTENBERG: It began in Boston and it began as part of my study for my master's degree. We had a choice as a graduate student, to either do a thesis or do the preparation for an exhibition of photographs. And I chose to do an exhibition. I did it jointly with another student, a woman named Jeannette Kahn?(199), and Jeannette and I organized an exhibition of, called "The Descriptive Tradition," which was showing the work of seven photographers that came out of the tradition of Eugene Atchet. And we showed two generations of photographers. Walker Evans, Cartier-Bresson, and going into André Kertesz, Robert Frank, Garry Winogrand and Joel Meyerowitz and other at the time younger photographers. And one of the great photographers in that exhibition was André Kertesz, then still alive and living in New York. Jeannette Nye?(208) had gone to the Museum of Modern Art to talk to John Szarkowski who was the head of the department about the ideas we had for this exhibition and to get some assistance in getting works that we could hang in the show in the university's gallery. And this was in the early 1970s. It was still the height of student unrest on campuses and John Szarkowski very nicely said that even though the university's gallery was a secure space, no academic student union was considered secure enough for the Museum of Modern Art to lend us works. But he became the go between for us to meet all the living photographers and the dealers who were dealing in photography at the time to get us works that we could borrow.

And we borrowed work from André Kertesz. We hung it in the show. And at the end I was doing the paperwork to wrap up this exhibition. I wrote to him and said to him I was returning work. I was putting in the press releases from the show and the comments that had been made. And there was one picture that I was particularly interested in myself, to acquire. It was at the time \$250. I didn't have \$250, as a graduate student, and I wrote to him and asked if I could, if he would save the picture for me, and if I could pay him \$50 a month to pay it off. And he wrote me back on a postcard, that's over there, framed. It's a postcard of another one of his pictures, and on the back, he wrote, "Dear Miss Zorn, please keep the photograph as a gift from me." And that was the very first image in the collection of photographs that I collected. It was, it still hangs in the house, a cornerstone of our photography collection. Years later, I saw André Kertesz in an art gallery in New York and went over and introduced myself. I had not met him. I had only spoken to him on the phone or written to him, and told him that that picture had launched a sizeable collection of photography that I had begun with his gift.

ANDERSON: Wow. But, how did your interest in Albert Einstein develop? It is so prominent in your collections.

FTRACHTENBERG: It is prominent in that we have eleven photographs by nine different photographers of Einstein, and began as a gift, as well. When we were at the University of Hartford, one of the colleges at the university was the Hartt School of Music, a very well known conservatory, and one of the visitors to the Hartt School of Music was Yehudi Menuhin, who came to be in residence for a week to do master classes with the string students. And following Yehudi Menuhin was Joseph Karsch, the portrait photographer, Canadian, who came down from Toronto to follow Yehudi Menuhin around so that he could photograph Menuhin. We knew that they were both visiting and we invited Karsch, we invited them separately, with different constituencies, but we invited Joseph Karsch to come to dinner. Karsch was a very well known name in portrait photography. His style was a little more commercial than artistic, for my taste. And we did not own a Karsch, although many people, if you said to them "name two

photographers would say Ansel Adams and Joseph Karsch. But we didn't own a Karsch. I was a little self-conscious about having a well known photographer to a house to see, when he walked around the house, he couldn't help but notice that we had photographs hanging on every wall, and none of his. So I was quite uptight before he got there. And he came through the house. It's very generous of his time. And he took my arm and he said to me, "Show me your photographs." And we walked around briefly, and I said here's a Dorothy Alang **?(270)** (Dorothea Lange?) and here's a this and here's a that." He nodded and nodded and nodded. And we sat down, we had dinner. The evening was over. We went home, and Stephen said to me, "what did you and Karsch talk about when you walked around?" I said "to tell you the truth, he had absolutely no interest in any of the pictures. I could tell by how he walked around, he was being polite but he couldn't care less."

A week later, a box arrives. I open up the box, and there's a lovely note, and it said "anyone who owns a portrait of Einstein's house should have a portrait of the man himself." Well, we did have a portrait of Einstein's house. It was by a photographer by the name of Robert Cumming, and it hung, just by circumstance, in a rather obscure corner of the house. And to have seen and noticed that picture meant that contrary to my apprehension, Karsch had paid very close attention to every picture he had looked at. And he sent us a portrait of Albert Einstein as a gift. So we now had a picture. Within days, a man knocks on the door and says, "My name is Lucien Anier**?(299)**. I am a photographer. I was here to photograph Yehudi Menuhin. I've done that before. I have a portfolio of Menuhin. I have a portfolio also of my pictures of Einstein." We looked at them, down to a portrait of Einstein we liked a lot, and we purchased it from him. Once you have two, you're on a roll. And we found that we started to notice pictures elsewhere by other photographers. And they were all very different, although it's clear Einstein loved to be photographed, he posed, he took on certain looks, and over a ten year period, we acquired eleven pictures.

ANDERSON: Wow. Of all the articles that I read through of students visiting the GW mansion, as such, that always shows up in the literature, the photographs of the Einsteins. It is a continuous thing. You have made quite an impression on a lot of students across the years.

FTRACHTENBERG: Well, they were, at that point in the president's house, the photographs went up the stairwell from the main entrance floor up to the entertaining floor of the house. So you had to walk by them. And also, the photographs were the primary artwork hanging in the house, particularly when we had student groups who were often a little ill at ease as to how they were supposed to be in the, not perform, but how they were supposed to act at these official events they came to. I used to give fifteen or twenty minute talks about the photographs, as kind of icebreakers. And then after that, the students would look around, talk among themselves about the pictures, talk to me about the pictures, so I developed about a half a dozen of these twenty minute talks, sometimes on collecting itself, the importance that I feel it is to collect something, anything, sometimes about the subjects we collected. A third of our pictures are portraits, a third are images of New York City and a third are things that didn't fit the first two categories.

ANDERSON: Walt Whitman came up several times.

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FTRACHTENBERG: Walt Whitman, yes. He was at the top of the stairs. A great Brooklyn person. And sometimes it would be on subject matter. I would do one on portraits or on architectural photography or photography between the wars, whatever the pictures kind of lent. I needed to make the talks interesting enough for me to hear them more than once.

ANDERSON: I had run across a figure at GW of two-hundred plus receptions a year. When you were at, actually I got that from President Trachtenberg, that it may be more or less, I don't know, but when you were at the University of Hartford, was it that intensive? Was this a good training ground, and how did you take to being, like, first lady of a university?

FTRACHTENBERG: Well, in Hartford, when I got to Hartford, we had a lovely large house that was for our use, a great Georgian colonial on four acres of landscaped grounds that was a six or seven minute walk from campus, right across the street and down the road. And when we got there, the trustees had mentioned that the previous president and his wife who were terribly active on campus, were very private people at home. And there had not been much of a social life that had been instituted among the faculty, staff and students. And they suggested that we might want to consider doing a little bit more of that. Well, we had come from Boston, where Stephen's work with students had led us to personally develop a style, which was that, if you were on opposite sides of the barricade during the day, it was often easier to discuss politics around food than it was around a picket line. And we invited a lot of students to our house over the years when we lived in Boston, for informal discussions about the Vietnam War, about what was going on in the world, about their changing views of government and society.

So we had a personal history of entertaining that we changed when we got to Hartford because we went from the fact that I did all the cooking in Boston to doing all the organizing and someone else doing the cooking. But, we enjoyed it personally. It was not something that was onerous for us to do. And we started by having a weekly faculty reception. Going through the list of faculty and inviting people. And every Tuesday, five o'clock we would have a short, maybe hour, maybe hour and a half cocktail reception. And then that would go on throughout the semester. And then Hartford is not the mecca for academic or business celebrities that Washington is. And so if someone comes to town to give a lecture, it is an event of the community, not just the campus. And we had several important lectures each year that outsiders came up to give. And if you had a cabinet officer visiting Washington, we would invite maybe forty of the business leaders of Hartford, the philanthropists of the city, whether they were of the university, donors to the university or not, trustees, faculty in the field of interest, and we liked to really mix up the town-gown, to always link people in the community to the academics on campus. And so we did a lot of that.

And, there was not a lot of history of it, as I mentioned, so I got to set a style and a manner of doing it that was my own, rather than inheriting someone else's. So, when we came here, I sort of had a decade plus experience of, more, I probably had twelve, fifteen years of feeding others on a routine basis.

ANDERSON: Oh, that's wonderful. When I, I came to GW about a year before President Trachtenberg and yourself came. And the one thing that did distress me was somewhat of the

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starkness of the campus. I was at Colgate University before on faculty there, and, you know, you've been, I don't know if you've been over there or not. It's a beautiful campus.

FTRACHTENBERG: I have been to Colgate, yes.

ANDERSON: It's a beautiful campus. When you, when President Trachtenberg accepted the position, you came down, what did you find distressful about the situation, without . . . Was there anything that did distress you?

FTRACHTENBERG: Distress?

ANDERSON: Distress.

FTRACHTENBERG: Well, I grew up on urban campuses in a way. Brooklyn College, although more of a built campus than some urban cities; was right in the middle of Brooklyn. Boston University was built along the T, along the railroad tracks, so to speak, the Metro of Boston, and was very much like GW, a combination of acquired buildings and newly constructed buildings without much organization. I find that exciting. I like the energy of mixing up the buildings, much the way NYU does as well. The pulse of the city and the pulse of the campus to me has more energy. Hartford was the first residential suburban campus that I had been part of, and that had in some ways greater architectural challenges than Washington, than GW, and that's where I first began to work on architectural design of public space, was organizing some of the placement of buildings in Hartford to unify what had been two acres, two hundred acres of farmland.

ANDERSON: I read some reports on that. That was fascinating.

FTRACHTENBERG: Yes. And when we got to GW, we were in the middle of clearly an urban city. What was difficult for me was to, as a newcomer, was to see where the campus began and where it ended. Because in most campuses that are city campuses, you sort of knew you were in front of the student union or you knew where you were. Sometimes you couldn't tell if you were in front of a dorm or an apartment house. You didn't know if that was a "GW lot" or not, and so it was a little barren in terms of identity. Not in terms of energy, but in terms of identity. Also, the scale of the city was so different. Washington's height regulation gave a certain look to the campus. I had not spent a lot of time in Washington before we came here. In fact, I had only visited twice before moving here in 1988. So, I had to even begin to get my bearings about where Foggy Bottom was in terms of the rest of the city, and learn my way around. And Stephen, who had spent time on more campuses than I did, attending Columbia, which is certainly in the middle of New York, Yale which is in the middle of New Haven, Harvard, it's fair to say, while it is in Cambridge, is like Yale, fenced off. And Columbia, too. Their fencing and their iron gates and their . . . have a little bit more homogeneity in their architectural style, was part of Stephen's interest in background in developing a unifying look to some of the motifs that would be on campus, to give GW some visual definition. And he did that through sculpture and grew some, the creation of Kogan Plaza and other things, which I was pleased to witness, but is frankly almost entirely his invention.



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ANDERSON: Well, I was going to follow that up a little bit with, I was on the original, what was called the beautification committee and then the amenities committee. How much involvement with your art and architectural background, how much involvement did you have in that early transition, because, to me, that was the pivotal point of when the campus began to change.

FTRACHTENBERG: Well, I got involved in the architecture of campuses, as I mentioned, in Hartford. And it came about when we got a large grant with, you know, we're talking about the mid nineteen-eighties and a five-million dollar grant seems like an enormous amount of money. To do, to put up an academic building. We had built new dormitories and the old dormitories on campus were products of the old federal funding, which were basically cinderblock buildings covered in brick. No style. They looked like military dorms. They're all over the United States. They were all built, you know, at the same eras in the post 60s. They were boring and functional.

To upgrade that, Stephen started to look at some of the more well-known and established architects in Connecticut, and at the time, Spencer Kelly was the dean of the Yale school of architecture, and he came and did a dormitory complex for the university and began to talk about creating urban spaces on this ununified campus. The next building that we built, Stephen asked if I would serve on the architect selection committee as his representative. And we interviewed seven world-class architects. Well, I should say, we interviewed seven architects, six of whom were world-renowned, one of whom was local. We felt we had to have a local Hartford architect in the mix. And the experience of listening to six very well-known established architects talk about their craft and what they were going to do gave me two experiences. One is that there was a vocabulary that one could start to use, which I found myself repeating and developing and thinking about. And it was about the amenities and the things that we could do to give visual unity to the campus. And the other was to understand that for most of these people, as interested as they were in Hartford, Hartford is not going to be their most exciting assignment. And they wanted the work, but we were never going to see these architects again. We were going to see their number four associate down below.

When the local architect came in, a marvelous man by the name of Tai Soo Kim came in to interview, we thought we thought we would just, this was the perfunctory hour. He'd be in and out. And he began to talk with such passion about this two hundred acres in the middle of this city that we couldn't help but take notice. He had a daughter, a young daughter at the time, who came to music lessons on campus. And Tai Soo said, "I drive on this campus all the time. I know what works and I know what doesn't work." And he started to talk about placing the building in a spot that would become the hub. And we got so turned on by it that we hired him, much to the surprise of the six men who had been interviewed and didn't get the other six. "How could you pick the local, not as well-known guy over me," And Tai Soo work in thinking about how students spend their day, how faculty go from one building to another, certainly influenced my vocabulary. And I think my vocabulary influenced Stephen's vocabulary. He was not nearly as intimately involved with the day to day of building what was the largest building on campus. It expanded the library by a third. It unified four academic buildings. It built a conference center. It built a museum. It built an exhibition space.

And I had worked the budget so carefully that with the contingency left at the end, I built a bridge. And the bridge was across something about the size of Rock Creek, and it was a little, it was called the Hog River. River certainly overstates it. It really was a trickle of a creek. But it meant that before that bridge, the students had to walk all the way around the ring road to get from the dorms to the academic part of campus. Now they came from the dorms, right over the bridge to the back end of the library. And the back of the library became a focal point. And the library itself became the main hub to which everything else flowed in and out. And it transformed the campus. And in that sense, we had a building that was a hub. When Stephen came to GW and spent lots of time walking the campus, he did the reverse. He cleared buildings and dressed up backyards and created Kogan Plaza, which became the hub that everyone walks through. So, in Hartford, it was a solid place in the middle of the campus. At GW, it was a negative that became the hub. It served the same purpose. It was just an inversion of forms

ANDERSON: So, you have somewhat fulfilled your architectural, early architectural desires.

FTRACHTENBERG: That's right. And in fact, I think my frustrations at not being an architect made me a sometimes difficult for the consultant's owner's management. Because I always had a point of view on how we might think about something. But it was really the notion that the students were spending all day on campus and that experience was part of their education. Whether it was pleasurable, easy to get around. Whether there was space to congregate and socialize was part of the learning experience. And that's what GW was lacking at the time. It was lacking a sense of public meeting spaces, of things that you didn't mind standing next to and chatting away. So, putting benches on campus, putting in a plaza, putting in a sculpture where you would stand to get your picture taken, things like that became a natural, and then developing the notion of the gates I think was a great move. It gave a sense of style. It gave a look of tradition. Yet it was not something that closed the campus off. It was really a motif, and not an isolating factor.

ANDERSON: You were lucky in that you were presented with an outlet for that architectural desire, where I know many people who have desired things and have never had the opportunity to express them, so it's always interesting how fate plays a hand. Did you, were you somewhat distressed when the urban planning department folded at GW? Was that something that you involved yourself in at any . . .

FTRACHTENBERG: No, I was not involved with it at all. And really didn't, didn't have anything to do with pro con, or anything about it.

ANDERSON: Sure. Let me just flip this over . . . *(End of side one of tape)*

*(Side two of tape, started at position 12 on tape)*

ANDERSON: We'll proceed in another about fifteen minutes or so. That will give you plenty of time.

FTRACHTENBERG: Good. Is that a problem? Go longer if you want.

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ANDERSON: All kinds of things can happen with this. It's very . . .

FTRACHTENBERG: Yes. Those of us who have erased documents even on the computer are well aware of the need for backup.

ANDERSON: As we covered, your experience at Hartford was obviously good, very good training for the social outlets at GW. And your work with public television, obviously, for the state of Connecticut, probably led you naturally to public television in Washington. Could you tell us how you first got involved with WETA, because I know you progressed all the way to a senior vice-president before your retirement?

FTRACHTENBERG: I began as a member of the board, not as a staff member. When I left Hartford, I, and it was announced that we were coming to GW, a couple of my colleagues on the Connecticut public broadcasting board who knew people on the Washington public broadcasting board, wrote to them and basically said, "board member changing jurisdiction," and one was Robert Bernstein, a man who had been president at one point of Brandeis University, had written, I believe, to Sharon Rockefeller and a couple of others, Homer Babich(?) (28), who was the chairman of our board at the time, knew Sharon and some of the other members, and so we moved to Washington, in the summer, I think it was August, of 1988.

That fall, September, October, I got a phone call from Sharon Rockefeller, Sharon Percy Rockefeller, who was then the chairman of WETA's board, a very, very well known in the public broadcasting world. She had been active in the national associations. And I knew her name. I'd never met Sharon. And she said, she understood I had been active in public broadcasting in Connecticut. Could the two of us have lunch? And she invited me to lunch at her home, with Ward Chamberlin, who was then the CEO of WETA, and the three of us had a lovely, long leisurely lunch, discussing all kinds of things, and at the end of the lunch, they invited me to join the WETA board, which I eagerly accepted. I was asked at the time what committees I would like to be on, and having been on the executive committee and the finance committee of the Connecticut station, I sort of knew that that's where a lot of the action took place. And so I said, "I'd like to be on the finance committee, and I understand that you are considering building a new headquarters and you have a building committee. I spend a lot of my time on architectural projects. I'd like to be on the building committee.

And I was put on both, although I later learned that there had been an eyebrow raised because, other than Sharon, there were no women on either of those committees, and the thought was that that might be a difficulty. And the chairman of the building committee was a man named Bob, Robert Cohen, Bob Cohen, and his colleague, Robert Pincus, were chair of the finance committee at the time, and they said to me, "not to worry, you're now on both." So, I was on the building committee and enjoyed it very much. They were evaluating possible sites and locations for WETA's new headquarters. They were going to move the station from Virginia into the District of Columbia.

And we had a, we were close to a deal with a building called the Old Hecht Company Building, across the street from what is now the Verizon Center, that was being developed by Abe Pollin for sports teams, not yet completed at this time. Oliver Carr controlled this space. He had just

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finished building a very large and interesting building for the AARP, and the old Hecht Company was to be the next part. That building had several zoning overlays. One was for an arts agency. And he had agreed that WETA could come into this building and be the arts agency. The building had large double height ground floor space, as many old department store buildings did. So, it had the height requirement we needed for broadcast studios. And Oliver Carr had also worked out an arrangement with the city that in lieu of the housing overlay, he would make a very sizeable contribution to a housing fund that a collection of Washington churches had put together. They were anxious for his payment. It was going to be used to satisfy a requirement from HUD to have a deposit put down on a new low moderate income housing **?(074)**. And we all went to the zoning meeting thinking this was a done deal. The city seemed interested. City government. Mr. Carr certainly was. Ollie was very supportive of WETA. The Council of Churches was, that was going to build this housing, not on that site, elsewhere in the city, was thrilled at what was happening.

And we got there to learn that a man named Terry Lynch was against it, and vocally against it. He wanted high income housing on that site in order to revitalize the neighborhood in a different way. He had been lobbying hard the members of the BZA, the Bureau of Zoning and Adjustment. And had, we learned, I think, made his case stronger than the other side. In my unofficial capacity, I would say he was responsible for killing that deal. And WETA's and Mr. Carr's plans were not approved. Much to the shock, I will tell you, of everyone sitting on the other side of the board, when they voted it down. I will say I was equally surprised to see that that building site stood empty until only a couple of years ago. It had ten or twelve more years of being empty. Not being able to be developed. Because of some of the onerous zoning overlays that Terry Lynch and others had demanded be on that site. So it served no one well. It certainly didn't serve WETA well. We were very shocked. Sharon then asked me if I would consider leaving the board and joining the staff part time to help find a new site. And I spent several years looking around Washington for a suitable location for WETA. We had very careful economic parameters of what we could afford to spend. And as the years went on, the prices of real estate in Washington got so high that it became clear that we were going to have a very difficult time. GW then made us a very attractive offer to come share a piece of property in GW. The neighbors in Foggy Bottom were against it. One woman in particular was sure she was going to be killed from radiation of our satellite dishes.

ANDERSON: I'm familiar with that incident.

FTRACHTENBERG: Yes.

ANDERSON: Please go on.

FTRACHTENBERG: Yes, an absurd and erroneous understanding of the science of satellite dishes. But eventually my work at WETA was completed in that we gave up moving to the District. I met five different directors of economic development. When the neighbors sued, the positive zoning decision GW got on our property, we decided we could not afford the litigation involved, and that we would just save the economics and stay in Virginia. It took us five years to be denied the ability to move into D.C. It took Arlington, Virginia twenty-eight days to encourage us, allow us to buy a building, and help us in every possible way possible.

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ANDERSON: It sounds like Arlington. It does.

FTRACHTENBERG: And they could not have been a better place for us to remain. That was our roots, and I'm very pleased that WETA chose to stay there. I'm sorry the District lost out, but it was Arlington's to gain and to remain. When I finished the relocation of the headquarters of building broadcast studios in Shirlington, remodeling an office building, getting everything set up, my work in a way was over at WETA. But at the time, there were several interesting staff changes going on. And the person who had been in charge of education at the station had left. And I went in to see Sharon Rockefeller, who was then herself the chief executive officer. She had left the board, and then elected to be the CEO, and I said, "I have a choice to make. If I want to stay in architecture and project development, my career has to be outside of WETA. And if I want to stay in public broadcasting, my job has to change from relocation of the headquarters, because that's ninety-eight percent done." And I said "I know you have an opening for a vice-president of education and outreach. I have another degree besides art history, and it's in that. I'd like to do that job." And she nodded. We had some good talks about what it would entail, and I became vice-president for education and outreach, which meant I did zoning around our radio tower and radio station and went with her to Richmond to do some Virginia relations with the state legislature and I also supervised all the production of educational products for our national television broadcasts as well as making projects that involved reading for young elementary school children. We did several series of video works in that. And I did that for several years. The outreach, the community outreach was very interesting, and over time, that portfolio grew, and my responsibilities changed, and the last two plus years, two and a half years I was there, I was senior vice-president for strategic projects and did various assignments.

And was at WETA the day of 9-11, was in the building the day, that the, the morning that the Pentagon was hit. I found that to be a traumatic day in many many ways. The need to keep a television station, the station that broadcasts the News Hour with Jim Lehrer to the country on the air, yet to be respectful of the needs of the people who worked for me to be with their families, was a very powerful day. And it stayed with me, and about a year and a half, almost two years later, I thought, you know, I've accomplished almost everything I want to do with the station. I've been there eleven and a half years. It was time to move on. Stephen had just started to think about what his own schedule was going to be, and I went in, I said to Sharon, "This is it. It's the end for me." It was maybe April. I said "I have a couple projects that are going to be over by the end of the fiscal year, which is June 30<sup>th</sup>, and I'm going to retire." And I did. And I think it was not just the work. I loved the colleagues. I loved the mission. But it was part of what I call my post 9-11 syndrome, that the time had come to just figure out what else I might want to do.

ANDERSON: Did the website, which keeps popping up everywhere, that was one of the special projects?

FTRACHTENBERG: That was one of the special projects. It was one of my ideas. It was a website we launched, and it may have just come down this year, called "Explore D.C."

ANDERSON: Right. I've seen it many times. I hated that it went down, though.

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FTRACHTENBERG: It was the early days of the web. We, I had an idea that, you come to Washington in the springtime, you look around the city, there are thousands and thousands of schoolchildren and their teachers who are here. Teachers often rotate the job. They don't necessarily want to be the chaperone to young teenagers on a school trip. There was no place for them to prepare, themselves or their students, for this trip. And I thought, I'll bet we could organize a website that would be both teacher preparation and student enjoyment on the history and the heritage of Washington. And we went to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and received an initial grant from them to do the preparatory work for this. And then got, a very generous WETA donor matched that and gave us more than sufficient funds to start out and do this. My colleagues in the education department were very enthusiastic and very supportive. And we engaged local teachers to write lesson plans about Washington, using buildings and documents that their students would see once they got here. We worked with high school students at Anacostia High School to write some of the profiles that were on the site, and we profiled both Washington, the federal city, and Washington, the local city, with neighborhoods, local themes, trying to bring these two parts of the city together.

While my colleagues in the education department were very supportive at WETA and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting was very supportive, I think it's fair to say the rest of my colleagues at WETA did not understand why I was spending my time doing this. If it wasn't a national television broadcast, my colleagues at WETA in those days had no interest whatsoever. And they were by and large totally unsupportive, which was very frustrating. Because almost immediately upon the launch of the site, the National Librarians Association named us "one of the great homework helpers of the western world."

ANDERSON: I love that site. I've been to it many times.

FTRACHTENBERG: It was a lot of fun to think through, a great challenge to design in a way that could be user-friendly and substantive, and I think we were doing a great educational service. But if you don't have the support of your colleagues to allow people to have the time to maintain it and to use it, it has a slowing-down effect on it, and that's what ultimately happened. Which is too bad. It was, we would get wonderful comments and letters from third-grade teachers, from parents, from both local Virginia schools, which used it all the time, D.C. schools, all around the country. We would be named, you know, the best site of the year by some fifth-grade class in Minnesota. We knew we had reached all over the country, and we were putting up historical and political information in an unbiased, reliable way. We took no point of view on judging presidents or buildings in the city. We wanted the teachers to have the freedom to do what they wanted to do with their own students. And as I said, I think, I'm not sure if you go look at it today, that it's still up.

ANDERSON: I haven't looked in the last . . .

FTRACHTENBERG: I haven't checked. I didn't want to have my heart broken by finding that out, but that's what I heard.

ANDERSON: I myself have submitted to the site many times and historians love it.

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FTRACHTENBERG: I was and I am very proud to be the executive producer of that website.

ANDERSON: Did you have any involvement with Telemundo as part of WETA or have any studios at WETA?

FTRACHTENBERG: WETA has its own broadcasting studios there, but we rented space. We had more space in the building than we needed and Telemundo was a natural partner, so the facilities manager negotiated that lease, not me.

ANDERSON: Okay. I was just wondering, because I've been to WETA many times, and my wife Blanche is on several committees. She just got through with one, where she was reading third grader reports or essays or something. It was some type of contest, I'm not sure, but, I've been infatuated with WETA for a very long time.

FTRACHTENBERG: Well, it's a very interesting station in that it has a great local Virginia history and yet became the third largest public broadcasting station in the country, in terms of its contribution of national productions to the country. And is the home station of Ken Burns, and all his documentary work comes out of WETA, and the home of the NewsHour and Gwen Ifill's Washington Week. So, you have three of the most important ongoing strands in public broadcasting live out of that station.

ANDERSON: Well, if we could, it's been over an hour. It doesn't seem that long. If we could have maybe just one more interview, because there are some other things about GW, and I think we could flow into that, but I certainly wanted to cover some of the aspects that we did cover this morning. So thank you very much.

FTRACHTENBERG: My pleasure. I enjoyed it. You make it very easy for me.

*(End of tape 1)*